

A library survivor offers up guidelines for others to follow

Eight Truths for Middle Managers in Lean Times

By David W. Lewis

I HAVE HEARD some librarians claim that current hard times are not all that bad. Times like these, they say, force concentration and focus. Adversity forces tough decisions. Crisis brings opportunity as well as danger. A little suffering is good for you and your library. Really, they say things like that! By the way, these librarians are mostly administrators.

I prefer to believe a sociologist I once knew who was fond of saying that the popular myths are incorrect. He had reviewed the research, he claimed, and, contrary to what we have been taught, the rich are happier. Having money is better than not having money. So, even if there may be a few bright linings among the gray clouds, let's not get confused—lean times are not fun.

If you are on the front line like me, you are just looking to survive. I have been managing public service operations for some time now. In the course of my travels and as a result of many battles, I have found eight truths for middle managers that have helped me in my quest for survival. I share them in hopes that they will help you, too.

David W. Lewis is Head, Research and Information Services Department, University of Connecticut, Storrs. A version of this article was presented as part of the Association of College & Research Libraries/University Libraries Section (ACRL/ULS) Current Topics Discussion Group panel, "Economic Crisis: Danger and Opportunity for Libraries," at the 1991 American Library Association Annual Conference in Atlanta



It is a zero sum game

There is no more money. There may be a few grants out there, and you should go for them, but grants-personship is a long shot at best. The important truth is that those who provide the cash, both library and university or municipal administrators, will not give the library more. They can't because they don't have it. Even blackmail—we will only be able to staff the reference desk from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., or the cataloging backlog will grow enormous—will have limited effect because the people with the money are being blackmailed from all sides. There is, however, a way to get more money. You can take it away from somebody else. If you believe in what you are doing, you have an obligation to try this. It can be shortsighted, and there is a risk of placing your departmental goals above those of the library as a whole. But it is unacceptable for others in your organization to misuse resources that could be put to better use by you. I am not suggesting all-out battles or search-and-destroy missions, but it is important to make your organization ask the hard questions whenever resources are allocated. Force your library to state its priorities and demonstrate how each allocation moves it closer to its most important goals. This stance will not make you popular, so watch your back and look for allies.



If you don't change the way you do things, quality will decline

This is fundamental. We are all being asked to do more with what we have, or to do what we have been doing with less, or, most likely,

we are being asked to do more with less. Contrary to what you might think, this is not impossible. But you will have to do things better, more efficiently. An often-cited alternative is to give up doing unimportant things. But we gave up the really unimportant long ago, and it is all but impossible to identify what some people call "trailing edge" services. The only real choice, at least at the departmental level, is to become more efficient: get computers and answering machines and clerical support; examine everything you do; use every dime better; look for new ways; change past practice. But it is equally important to change as a demonstration that you are in control, that you have the power to shape what you do. It is the only way to empower yourself and your staff. Finally, while it is important to change how we do things, the values that underlie our services and the outcomes we seek need not change. They should be examined, and, in many cases, they will be reaffirmed.



Change is risky, but necessary

It would be nice if we could try new things without having to give up the old. But this is not now an option. We need a way out of the scholarly journal mess; we need to move from a collection of printed materials to a service based on electronic resources; and we need to assist faculty, students, and patrons as they learn to function in the Information Age. The general direction is clear. The problem is that the required changes are revolutionary and scary. The fact that we have no choice forces us to move when we might otherwise hesitate. Like Butch

Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, we will find that jumping off the cliff is really not difficult when there are no alternatives.



Get and keep control of your resources—including staff

This has two parts. First you must have control of how you spend the budget that is allocated to you. If you can only spend your online budget online and your book budget only on books, you don't have enough flexibility. These days, you need room to maneuver. Fighting to gain discretion over resources is one of the most important battles a middle manager has to fight. Second, you have to be willing to break with past practice. Remember that you have choices and that all of your choices have opportunity costs: e.g., the value you might have generated if you had done something else with the resources required for the project you chose. I find it valuable to list all of the things I might do, figure out which ones will give my users the most benefit, and work down the list until I run out of time and money. Another approach is to stop before you sign off on any invoice larger than \$500 and ask: "Is this the most important thing I can do with this money?" If it is not, do something else. And if you don't see and approve of the way your money is spent, it's not really your money. Even these days, most libraries do have a fair amount of money. Not enough to do everything, but there is usually enough to do at least some of the important and most beneficial things.

Since you won't have the money or staff to do everything and identifying the unimportant is at best difficult, you have to stay focused on what matters most, the things that will give you the most benefit. Every book on successful business strategy says defining what business you are in is critical. This is particularly important when you are managing professional staff. Staff are your most important resource. You can't manage professional staff on a day-to-day basis; you need to depend on their ability to internalize the right goals and to work toward accomplishing them. This means planning. You should set and review goals at least once a year and do task-level objectives more often. An auxiliary benefit of setting and reviewing goals and objectives is that you get a clear picture of what you and

your department have accomplished. Make it a practice to remind yourself, your staff, and your boss of what your department accomplished every six months.



Clarify your "visibility of consequences"

There is a concept in the management literature called "visibility of consequences." It means that you can see the results of actions—you can determine whether what you have tried works or whether it doesn't. In most libraries the visibility of consequences is remarkably low. It is almost impossible to tell whether anything we do matters. As a result most of what we do we do on faith. These days faith is stretched thin; it is not enough to sustain staff morale or to convince anyone to give you money. Raising the visibility of consequences of your operation is key if you are to acquire more resources. You have to be able to show that the last time someone gave you some money you spent it well and that it had an impact. Unfortunately, raising the visibility of consequences almost always means counting things—reference questions, CD-ROM slots booked, microform copies made, books cataloged, books reshelfed. Many librarians hate counting. This dislike of quantification is misguided. Every month I do a report of my department's activities. It is long and full of numbers. At the beginning I highlight a series of key indicators of our activity comparing this month with the same month last year. We can see that instruction is up and we know who did the sessions. We know that the number of CD-ROM slots booked by users is up. We know that without counting because we watched the lines grow. But the fact that it was up 1000 slots, or 35 percent, over last year makes it real to my administration.



Vision is your job

It is easy to assume that vision is an administrative responsibility. It's the library director's failure if the library's goals are not clearly articulated, or if they sound like apple pie and motherhood—"to serve the information, research, teaching, and other needs of your community, the state, the nation, and the world." It's not your problem, right? Wrong! If your administrator doesn't have

the energy or the time to provide leadership, then you have to do it. These days even good administrators are too busy managing survival to worry about vision. In addition, they are often separated from the day-to-day. They don't know what's really going on. The last time most of them had to worry about a frontline operation they were sorting out AACR2 and desuperimposition, or choosing between DIALOG and BRS and which model Silent 700 to buy. Vision needs to be firmly rooted in today's capabilities—CD-ROMs, LANs, on-demand journal article services, and E-mail. You want the future to be built upon what you think is important. And you're the one who knows. It's your problem to provide vision for your department and to push it up to your administration. If you're not willing to accept this responsibility, not much else matters.



Keep your message simple, and repeat it over and over again

Having accepted the responsibility for vision, learn from Ronald Reagan—keep it simple and repeat it at every opportunity. I have four messages for my boss: 1) The people in my department work hard; 2) My department does what it says it will do; we can get the job done; 3) Demand for our services is up; our primary clientele need what we do; 4) Given a choice, we always prefer the electronic alternative because it works better. I suspect my boss gets tired of hearing this, but he is not confused about where I stand. When push comes to shove, he knows the choices I would want him to make. And usually, he chooses wisely. Administrators live busy and confused lives. You should work hard not to add unnecessarily to the turmoil.



Stamina is required

During World War II the army studied men who had received battlefield promotions, hoping to find out something about leadership under fire. What was discovered was that those who demonstrated leadership in battle were smarter than the average, but only by a little. They were older on average, but again this was not really significant. The factor that mattered most in battlefield leadership was stamina. But I bet most of you knew that.